

**From Epic Margins to Narrative Centre: Female Agency in Contemporary
Indian Mythological Fiction**

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Abstract

In recent years, mythological fiction has become a significant literary arena in India for reviving the image of women in the traditional epic. In this paper, I'll look at the ways in which contemporary retellings of myths have shifted the focus of the marginalized female figures into the central story, reconstructing their experiences, identities and abilities to act. The book is mainly devoted to the reinterpretation of the characters like Draupadi, Sita, Urmila, Surpanakha, Uruvi etc. of the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Pratibha Ray and Volga. The study uses a qualitative method of close textual reading and comparative literary analysis and is informed by feminist literary criticism, revisionist mythmaking, Indian feminist historiography and adaptation theory. It explores the various narrative techniques including first-person narration, changing locations of focalisation, flashback and re-imagining of previously unexplored experiences that disrupt the common understanding of epic events. Focusing on female subjectivity, bodily autonomy, marriage, motherhood, resistance and gender and social hierarchy. The analysis shows that the retellings have made women more visible on the literary stage and more powerful than ever in terms of their moral authority, but have also exposed the constraints of literary empowerment. Women have more opportunities to express themselves, but they are often limited by aspects of their culture, romantic rules and commercial interests to be able to change the social structure in which they live. The study also highlights the under-representation of women who are members of the caste families as one of the major weaknesses of the genre. It argues that modern Indian mythological fiction is a kind of complex feminist literary revision which critiques the authority of the narrative, but does not necessarily challenge the institution that upholds it. The paper highlights the distinction between voice of the narrative and agency of transformation and calls for a more inclusive understanding of the reinterpretation of a myth.

Keywords: Female Agency, Mythological Retellings, Feminist Revision, Indian English Literature, Narrative Recentring, Patriarchy, Female Subjectivity and Gender and Caste.

The paper is a literary critical text, not of reception research nor ethnography and thus the claims are to be understood in that context. The main archive comprises of English language mythological novels written in India from 2008 to 2021, along with *Yajnaseni* and *The Liberation of Sita* both translated into English by Pratibha Ray and Volga respectively. The discussion of regional-language texts is done in the context of existing scholarship and this is a real limitation on the argument: if the Odia, Telugu, Bengali texts could be read in the original, the discussion could be more informed on what proportion of the feminist elements in

the modern novel recur in these traditions and on the origins of the modern novel itself (Ramanujan 49).

The technique is a close reading with theoretical framing. Individual scenes (the swayamvara, the dice game, the mutilation of Surpanakha, the fire ordeal, Urmila's fourteen years) are read comparatively in both the canonical and the contemporary versions, paying attention to the concepts of focalisation, the ordering of the narrative, interpolation and the moral weight given to individual scenes. Theoretical material is taken from two traditions that are deliberately juxtaposed: Anglo-American and French feminist criticism which provides the vocabulary of re-vision and revisionist mythmaking and Indian feminist historiography which provides the caste-gender analysis that is lacking in the Western frame, which otherwise distorts. (Mohanty 88)

There are three limitations which should be clearly expressed. First, the paper does not even try to quantify who reads the genre, but a number of its assertions about commercial pressure would be greatly aided by some supporting evidence. Second, it has focused selectively on the expansive field and a few prominent novelists like Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan and Koral Dasgupta, who, nonetheless, appear only briefly. Third, criticism that denies the popular fiction a critical assessment ultimately patronises it and such evaluative judgements are presented here as critical opinion and are contestable. Sarojini Naidu says:

Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And Sorrow looks into her face...
Who shall prevent the subtle years,
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?
— Sarojini Naidu, *The Pardah Nashin* 87)

The question Draupadi asks after losing her at dice in Yudhishtira's turn at the Kuru assembly is as much a question of literature as it is of discomfort. The question is simultaneously both legal and moral: By what right should a man gamble his wife's freedom when he has already lost his own? In the classical text the question goes unanswered. The elders remain silent, Bhishma is vague about the nature of dharma and things do not resolve through any logic but instead through divine fate. The woman asks and the men cannot reply; a god provides the cloth. This paper suggests that this is the form of the unanswered female interrogation that has been the generative wound from which the contemporary Indian mythological fiction has emerged (Daschadhuri 184). Indian writing in English dates back to the early 2000s and has been gaining in momentum since 2008, when significant numbers of novels in English have been written which return to the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to tell them from the perspective of the women in the stories. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gave Panchaali a first-person voice and an acknowledged inner life, while Kavita Kane has developed an entire authorial career around an array of other women, like Uruvi, Urmila, *Yajnaseni*, Surpanakha, Satyavati, Ahalya — all of whom are only furniture in the narrative, even though Anand 93, had already done a similar job of interior reconstruction decades ago in the Odia-language *Yajnaseni* (Anand 93). In addition to these, *Sita* by Devdutt Pattanaik,

Sita: Warrior of Mithila by Amish Tripathi, the asura-centred novels by Anand Neelakantan and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga is so dense that it could be considered a genre on its own. But the important one is not whether they are popular (they surely are), but what kind of work they do in the culture. There are 3 available roles. The first is essentially celebratory, the novels being a recovery of women who were silenced. The second, skeptical, is the one that views them as a market-based mythological romance in which feminist language becomes a product differentiator. The third of the three, of which this paper follows, is that the novels are best approached as a contested space where both true feminist re-vision and the normalizing and dominant “business of popular genre fiction” are always at work, creating texts which are neither wholly radical nor wholly complicit (Ostriker 72). The paper has five substantive movements. It first tries to define the “margins” of the epic: structurally speaking, what is marginal? Historically, who is marginal? It then provides a theoretical toolkit for reading revision - a “toolkit” that is a synthesis of Anglo-American feminist revisionist theory and Indian feminist historiography. The third movement discusses the narrative technique of recentering: the concept of focalisation, voice, temporality. The fourth explores agency as experienced in the novels: through the body, marriage, motherhood and refusal. The fifth is a reflection on reception, the space of market-place and the boundaries of the form. Finally, an evaluation section will be included to appraise the successes and failures and to identify areas for further exploration. The very concept of ‘moving women to the centre’ is built on the foundation of a clear description of the margin.

The Sanskrit epics are not universally misogynistic and it would be a serious mistake to interpret them as a single Patriarchal entity. Draupadi is heard berating men in the Mahabharata, Gandhari curses Krishna, Kunti invokes the gods herself and Savitri is able to argue with Yama and Shakuntala successfully reproaches Dushyanta, all this is demonstrated at length and in great detail — the Mahabharata woman’s legal and moral force is much stronger than that of the courtly version by Kalidasa, as Romila Thapar has revealed. The epics have no powerful women, just a continuous presence of female interiority as a governing perspective. Women do act, women do talk, but it is not their narration (Thapar 44). This is an extra, not necessary element. The two epics are structured around the concept of lineage, inheritance, kingship and war, where women are only a point of transfer. In early India, female sexuality was so tightly connected to the purity of the caste system that the control of female sexuality was a way of securing the purity of the caste system, as Uma Chakravarti argues in her basic analysis of the Brahmanical patriarchy. In such a system, the woman is structurally required and narratively dispensable, required because she bears the line, dispensable because the story being told is a story about the line, not her (Chakravarti 579).

In the early history of India, Uma Chakravarti’s initial study shows, the control of women’s sexuality was an integral part of the maintenance of caste purity: the endogamous caste order could only reproduce itself through the regulation of who women bore children to. In such a system, the woman is structurally required, but narratively dispensable; that is, while the woman is necessary as part of the system, it is the family line that is the story being told, not the woman (Chakravarti 579). The modern novels are written against the very same

prescriptive grammar. Notably, the same text elsewhere says that the gods are happy when women are revered; and that contradiction between worship and subordination is one that is repeated in the retellings: their heroines are revered then disposed of (Ramanujan 49).

There are, therefore, several different types of margins. Then there is the time available for the narrative: Urmila, wife of Lakshmana, appears in Valmiki in a few verses and her fourteen years waiting is virtually nonexistent, so much so that the folk tradition had to create the Urmila-nidra, the absence of sleep that she took upon herself, to explain the presence of Urmila. There is the margin of moral attention: Surpanakha's mutilation is narrated as an episode in Rama and Lakshmana's forest career and her pain is given no independent weight. Then there is the margin of legitimacy: In Kane's novel, Uruvi is a character with the lightest of scriptural justification because Karna's wives appear only lightly individuated in the Mahabharata. There is the castes and species as well: Rakshasi Hidimbi, cursed woman Ahalya, apsara Menaka — entities who are subjugated twice, in the first place because of their class and caste outside the varna and, the second because of their species (Dev Sen 177).

A great thing about Rich's formulation is that it rejects the nostalgic and derivative notion that a re-read of an inherited text is a backwards step. Re-seeing is to go into the past text with the critical other perspective and thereby to disrupt the present authority of the text. Alicia Ostriker makes it a poetics. In "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" she claims that the appropriation of mythic material by women writers is in fact a double performance, appropriation of the cultural authority of myth and a change in its meaning, making the thing that is suppressed in the myth visible (Ostriker 72). The metaphor of the thief is important. The woman writer is not the one that's building a new mythology, because a private mythology doesn't get cultural approval; she steals the already established one and re-writes it from within. It is exactly the approach of Divakaruni and Kane, the novels of whom rely on the reader's background of the familiar. Thus, three frames to represent the Indian feminist viewpoints are necessary. Firstly, the Brahmanical patriarchy of Chakravarti, already mentioned, who maintains that gender in India is always bound up with caste (Cixous 886). Second, the intervention of historiography by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, who have shown in their *Recasting Women* how colonial modernity and nationalist reform interacted to create a new ideology of Indian womanhood—educated but chaste, modern but traditional, whose "afterlife" is to be found in the retellings' heroines, who are almost always intelligent, articulate and sexually loyal. Thirdly, the Hindu wife as the carrier of the national essence—which is what makes a novel make *Sita* eloquent and self-possessed without ever making her unfaithful (Chakravarti 579).

To these can be added the influential essay by Madhu Kishwar on the 'contemporary *Sita* cult', which suggests that the appeal of *Sita* lies not in 'false consciousness' but in the fact that *Sita*'s survival is interpreted as her superiority over Rama, not her subservient to him. That is a part of the enigma of the retellings: Their heroines don't typically abandon the tradition altogether. They argue with it, embarrass it, out-reason it - but they are still in it. Kishwar's model is not a failure of nerve, however, as it is a "recognisable" strategy of Indian women's cultural practice (Sarkar 52). Lastly, there is the theory of adaptation by Linda Hutcheon. The pleasure

of adaptation is not parasitic, says Hutcheon; it is a repetition with variation and is itself a kind of creation. However, Julie Sanders' work on distinction between adaptation, which is an appreciation of the dependence of one on another and appropriation, in which the source is brought into a new domain, can be used to position most Indian retellings closer to the adaptive side. These novels can be given a precise name with the help of Gerard Genette's idea of hypertext written over a hypotext, as Kishwar explains (31).

The reader in the classical text goes through the scene from the point of view of the assembly: the outcry; the paralysis of the elders; and the theological solution. In Divakaruni's interpretation, the reader suffers the insult within the insulted body and the miracle of the cloth is not a divine vindication of righteousness but a sketchy mercy that hasn't eliminated the injustice. Who has been shamed is thus changed. This is the shift of focalisation as described by Gerard Genette and the shift of moral power as defined by a feminist reading (Daschaudhuri 184). Kavita Kane's method is not so extreme and somewhat different. She usually has a close third person perspective from the heroine's point of view, allowing her to shift between "private" and "public" perspectives. While she is sacrificing intimacy, she is also gaining in argumentative range; her novels are brimming with exchanges between women who argue about dharma with men and among themselves (Genette 194). The fourteen years of abandonment of Urmila are no longer the gap in the novel, or the gap between the object of the story, but the focus of the story in *Sita's Sister* and the novel's unstated premise is that waiting is an event — that Urmila's abandonment has a story and that the epic does not tell it is an ideological decision, not a silent logic of narration. Sarojini Naidu says:

Now I am a thought-worn singer
In life's high and lonely places. Fairy fancies,
fly away, To bright wind-inwoven spaces,
— Sarojini Naidu 55).

Secondly, the genre uses its past to illustrate the events of the present, a technique frequently employed in the genre. Divakaruni's *Panchaali* tells its story from a time following the war and thus every early scene has to be described within the shadow of its repercussions. It is a conventional device, but in the setting of the epic, it serves a certain purpose: it removes the privilege of the males that they acted in a developing dharmic necessity and substitutes a woman's estimate of the cost of the entire thing. For Liedeke Plate, counter-memory is not simply another version of the past, but is a challenge to the cultural machinery that is responsible for remembering some pasts and forgetting others.

The most apparent is the explicit act of choosing. Kane's *Menaka's Choice* creates the apsara who seduces Vishwamitra — in the classical story, merely a product of Indra's dread — and constructs her as a woman who chooses, who loves, one who suffers as a result of abandoning Shakuntala. The feminist claim of the novel is modest but non-fiction: The instrument can't be guilty and guilt is a transfer and so is the personhood. In another novel iconoclastic idea, Divakaruni selects to bring with him throughout his life a constant attachment to Karna in *Panchaali*. This romanticization and diminishment has been criticized, but the counter-argument is that a woman who is allowed only to desire what is allowed is not a subject

and that the appeal of the novel is exactly in what it is she isn't allowed to want (Mahmood 15).

The retellings in a persistent effort restore the body. In the episode of the classical dice game, menstruation is a ruining factor among the factors in Draupadi's humiliation; in the modern novels, it is a bodily experience and not a pollution problem. The four stories of childbirth, ageing, disfigurement and desire are explained in great detail. Kane's Lanka's Princess turns Surpanakha's disembodied face into the structuring face of an entire life, thereby transforming a comic-grotesque moment of the Ramayana into an examination of how violence against a woman's body is normalised when the woman is outside the categories of respectability. The caste/species logic being exposed is at this moment: Surpanakha can be cut off, because she is a rakshasi and her desire is monstrous because her body is (Butler 147).

The privileged way of resistance is speech and Draupadi is the emblem of the genre. In the sabha, her question is unanswerable and the retellings know that it is and that its power is in the unanswerability. The use of speech in these novels is not always very instrumental (no one seems to interrupt the dice game because Draupadi is an effective speaker) but it sets a record. It turns an injustice from an occurrence to a naming. In this context, the question of whether the subaltern can speak is invoked too loosely in her case; her argument has to do with the inability of the dominant systems of representation to receive the subaltern's speech and the epic sabha is a near-perfect illustration of just that inability to take up (Spivak 308).

Material conditions are vital to this genre and cannot be neglected, as is often done in accounts of it. The mythological retelling in English is a commercial category with a particular publishing ecology, which is represented by Rupa, Westland, HarperCollins India and Penguin India, selling their books at price points that allow for a mass domestic readership, present them in the airport bookshops and get popular in social media, mainly among urban, educated, English-reading women. The fear of Indian writing in English, its double duty of explaining India to the outside world and of proving its verisimilitude to the native population, is very much current as Meenakshi Mukherjee's observations make clear (297). The mythological novel takes care of the anxiety nicely: it is a thoroughly Indian story, unimpeachably. This resolution has ramifications. Firstly, the novels have to be legible to readers who revere the source. Devotional feeling imposes a limit on criticism: Rama can be portrayed as cold, rigid, politically astute, but he can be shown wrong, very rarely, without compromising him as a subject for worship. Second, there's a constant gravitational pull of the romance plot. The recentred heroine is usually assigned a love interest and the emotional arc and resolution and the feminist content is usually forced into that. Third, the single exceptional woman is the genre's obsession and often makes analysis difficult. The same may be true about a novel bringing together one intelligent, misunderstood queen: it can leave the system that gave birth to her unchanged — a logic of narration that Nivedita Menon has called the 'replacement of the exceptional woman with the political question' (Chakravarti 579).

Then there's the politics in the narrow sense. The mythological fiction became popular in the modern context around a time when the assertion of the Hindu majority in public discourse was growing in intensity in India and the epics play a pivotal role in the political

language. It is in between in that, as retellings, they appear in the space between the two. On the other hand, the feminist re-vision challenges the patriarchy behind the reading of the epics that dominates much majoritarian reading. On the other, the amount of love, detail, novelization surrounding the Hindu mythic material makes it culturally central and the absence of the Muslim, Christian, Dalit and Adivasi women's narrative traditions is striking. But Anand Neelakantan's novels with a theme of asura and the scattered and limited Dalit reinterpretation of the epics, continue to stand out as exceptions (Showalter 36).

Another restriction is on caste. Chakravarti's model identifies a conceptual link between caste and gender, but the novels do not explicitly address it. Social snobbery is the theme of the suta status of Kanra in Kane's *Karna's Wife*, which is usually interpreted as an inoperative element of the varna system but not as an interruption of the system. The marginal in fiction of the marginal is the unnamed women of the forest peoples, Ekalavya's mother, Hidimbi. It has not equally shifted the victims of the caste order to centre stage, however, the genre has brought women there. (Daschaudhuri 184) Last, but not least, there's the matter of the quality of the writing, which sometimes does not dare rise above the popular fiction it criticizes, from a false generosity. The genre's prose is uneven and its dialogue often has an expository burden, that is, characters explain to each other their social analysis, which detracts from its fictional qualities, but enhances its polemical ones. We know this isn't a dismissal. It assumes that the books are read as literature, rather than just as a sociological symptom (Kane 272).

This is a burden on three scenes. The first is the swayamvara, the epic's version of archery competition and the novel's version in which the prize has opinions, is an auction. The second is the dice game, which transforms a constitutional crisis into an assault, by the shift of the focalisation. The third is the war's aftermath, in which the novel's dead serve as a counter summary of the assertion that the war was fought to restore Draupadi's honour. If she is to be thus honoured, why wasn't she asked for her opinion on the price? The romance subplot is the one thing that restricts the achievement. The attachment of Panchaali to Karna, without sexual connotations, is the most discussed feature of the novel and there are sharp differences of opinion. On the other side of the reading, a woman who can be given only sanctioned desires is not a subject and the attachment is the exact moment when Panchaali goes past her role. The sceptical interpretation is that the novel is a representation of a political complaint turned into a personal yearning and a woman who thinks about a man she didn't marry has been recentered into a space that is smaller than the one she vacated. The readings are both defensible and their co-existence a fair description of the condition of the genre (Divakaruni 351).

The Forest of Enchantments by Divakaruni and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* are the two extremes that can be chosen when it comes to recentering *Sita*. However, Divakaruni continues to see the marriage as the organizing relationship and refuses to accede to the idea that *Sita* surrendered herself to the gods, instead viewing it as a judgment passed on Rama. The move is the elegant and limited one of saving *Sita*'s dignity but not destroying the frame in which her dignity is at stake. The dismantling is done by Volga's stories. Volga does not reinterpret *Sita*'s identity as wife but rather interprets her identity away, as in the case of *Sita*'s

relationship with Surpanakha, Ahalya and Renuka and Urmila, who are all wives who have been discarded as *Sita*'s husband is removed from the world.

Conclusion

The movement traced in this paper — from epic margin to narrative centre — is genuine, consequential and incomplete. It is genuine because the technical means by which contemporary Indian mythological fiction effects the shift are substantive rather than cosmetic: the relocation of focalisation, the elaboration of interiority, the conversion of narrative gaps into narrative substance and the insistence that a woman's assessment of events is itself a form of knowledge about them. Urmila's fourteen years, Surpanakha's ruined face, Uruvi's unauthorised marriage, Panchaali's retrospective accounting of a war fought in her name: these are not decorations upon the epic but arguments with it. It is consequential because of scale. These are not experimental texts read by a few hundred specialists; they are mass-market novels that have introduced a broadly feminist mode of questioning to hundreds of thousands of Indian readers who would not describe themselves as feminists and might resist the label if it were offered directly. The genre performs, in effect, a vernacularisation of feminist critique through the most authoritative narrative material the culture possesses. Ostriker's thief has entered the house of myth and is redistributing its contents. And it is incomplete for reasons that are structural rather than accidental. The market requires romance; devotion sets a ceiling on critique; the exceptional heroine displaces the systemic question; caste remains under-examined; and the interiority that gives these novels their power can also substitute for the plot-level consequence that would constitute agency in its fullest sense. A woman who narrates her subordination with great eloquence has gained a voice, which is not nothing, but she has not necessarily gained the power to act. What would a fuller realisation look like? It would involve, first, novels willing to follow Volga in dissolving the wifely frame altogether rather than enriching it; second, sustained attention to the epics' caste-marginal and forest-dwelling women; third, formal experiment beyond the retrospective confessional mode, which has become something close to a house style; and fourth, a criticism willing to evaluate these books as novels rather than only as positions.

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